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Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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A WALK THROUGH A FIR-WOOD IN MIDWINTER.

BY MISS C. A. ROOPER.

THERE are few who do not derive pleasure and interest by a walk through a Fir-wood in midsummer, when its cool shade tempers the burning heat of the sun, its ferns with their silvery green give repose to the eye wearied with the more vivid colours of the open landscape, and its sparse undergrowth is full of insect life and a covering to many lovely flowers; but in midwinter its attractions are not so obvious. Its gloom and silence do not seem inviting, its atmosphere is somewhat chill, and its vegetable and animal life are popularly considered to be wrapt in a death-like slumber. In opposition to these prejudices, I venture in this paper briefly to describe some of those objects to be seen in a Fir-wood in winter, which render a walk through it both pleasant and interesting, and which may induce some of my readers to try the experiment and gain from it as much enjoyment as I have gained myself.

To the eye of the artist or poet the general aspect of the wood itself during the winter has a peculiar charm. The cold grey light diffused through its arcades enhances the local colouring of the various objects, and at the same time envelopes them all in a subdued tone of harmony. The tall erect stems rising from the tawny ferns and dark green bramble bushes, or more generally from the ruddy pine-needle strewn ground, crowned with their heavy masses of foliage, are suggestive, through their symmetry, of "calm repose"—conducive to the flight of fancy. But to the eye of the naturalist there is a deeper interest, through the examination of the details. The stems themselves are probably the first objects to attract attention, and their red hue is noticeable in contrast with their summer blackness. The cause of this change is easily explained by the strips of bark

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lying on the ground, proving that the Fir tree in common with the Birch, the Plane and some other trees, shed their outer bark at certain seasons of the year respectively, leaving their inner bark exposed to view, which, in the case of the Fir tree, is red in colour. This process, however, is a gradual one, so that Dame Nature has plenty of time to cast her fruitful hand over the remaining rugged bark, producing an over-growth of varied vegetation. It is to be remarked with regard to this vegetation, which consists chiefly of ivy, moss, lichens and fungi, that the two former are to be found on the south or sunny sides of the stems, whilst the two latter grow only upon the northern or shady sides. Interspersed with these larger plants, and clothing the bark with a bright green, is a small powdery kind of stuff which, when submitted to the microscope, proves to be composed of tiny plants, consisting each of one cell, perfect in its way and capable of reproducing itself to an unlimited extent. It is known by the name of *Protococcus*. The lichens deserve special attention, because they are some of the most curious and interesting objects in plant life; they are, in fact, a combination of two plants—a symbiosis—of an alga, which is a very simple form of plant, and of a fungus. These two plants are thus joined together for mutual support, each supplying for their united welfare what the other lacks. Thus the alga supplies through decomposition the necessary gases and starch, whilst the fungus provides the organs of reproduction.

We now pass on to the examination of the ground, the base of our work of observation. It is covered for the most part, as I have before remarked, with pine-needles, which act like a thatch and thus are a check to ordinary vegetation, but are on the contrary favourable to its slow decay, and therefore provide a fertile nursery for fungi of all descriptions. We are apt to despise, as a rule, these poor fungi, to call them toad-stools, and otherwise treat them with contempt and perhaps disgust. But there are mushrooms and mushrooms, and, not excepting the well-known edible one, I know no more beautiful study than that of this vast family of flowerless plants. A Pine-wood is one of their most favourite haunts, and therefore one of its principal attractions to a student of nature. The principal types are (*a*) the *Agaricini*, which may be easily recognised by the lower surfaces of their

caps being split into parallel blades (the edible mushroom is an Agaric); (b) the *Polyporei*, of which the under surfaces of their caps are covered with holes like pin pricks; (c) the *Tremellini*, of a peculiar shape like a fossil sponge; and (d) the Puffballs. The family of the *Agaricini* comprise many beautiful specimens, for instance, the scarlet *Amanita muscarius*; the genus *Cortinarius*, varying very much in size and colour, from a sombre brown to a bright yellow; and there is a very lovely example which is not so common, but it is of an exquisite ivory white, and forms a table fit for the Fairy Queen. But there are Agarics to be found with purple caps and white pillars, grey ones with curious scales, orange ones with a milky juice, and many more which reward the diligent seeker. The family of the *Polyporei* is a numerous one, and many fine and handsome fungi belong to it. The yellow *Boletus* is one of the most common and the most striking. The *Tremellini* are a very strange growth, and are quite distinct from all other mushrooms. The *Tremella mesenterica* or Witches' Butter is the commonest, and is to be found at the base of many of the trees. Again, the rotting stumps left by the woodman after his axe has felled the lofty trunks, provide a perfect garden for these beautiful allies to the more generally admired flowering plants. On them are to be found the stiff shell-like *Auricularia*; the yellow *Clavaria*, erect and branching like a tiny hand with its fingers spread out; the scarlet or yellow beads of the *Lycogala*; and the diminutive red pillar, with its oblong cap of the *Cordyceps Militaris*. The ground, however, is not always so completely covered with the pine-needles, and where it is not, a soft carpet of mosses spreads itself over it. These mosses generally consist of the Feathered mosses, the Earth mosses, and the Beardless mosses. These mosses add much to the delicate colouring of a winter scene, for it is the season of their perfection, and their leaflets are vivid with a brilliant green, differing from their somewhat dusky colour in the summer. The cause of this is probably due to the arrangement of the Chlorophyll granules in the cells, of which the plants are composed. The Chlorophyll granules, which contain the green colouring matter of the leaflets during the winter, are dispersed all over each individual cell, whilst in the summer, partly to avoid the heat of the sun, partly through the action

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of dry weather, these granules gather round the walls of the cells, leaving the centres empty, and thus the green colour is not so evenly distributed over the whole plant, and it is in consequence less brilliant. Intermixed with the mosses are to be seen the fruiting parts of a common lichen (a *Cladonia*), popularly named Fairy Cups, tiny goblets of a silvery grey, proper to adorn a Fairy's banquet. Scattered on the ground also are the central stalks of the fir-cones deprived of their scales, which have been nibbled off by the squirrels for the sake of reaching the little seeds at their base, to which the squirrels are very partial.

I have now enumerated some of the objects which render a walk through a Fir-wood in midwinter both pleasant and interesting. They have been taken from plant life because in the winter season animal life is dormant. The busy activity of the summer is quiescent, and nothing disturbs the repose of the wood except the vision of a squirrel running up some stem, or frequently the sharp cry of a solitary pheasant, which, having escaped the sportsman's gun, has found shelter in the Fir-trees. To this repose, having concluded our stroll, we must leave this all-engrossing spot, having found, I hope, "tongues in trees" and "good in everything."